

July 31, 2013

Dear President Obama and President Hadi:

My name is Faisal bin Ali Jaber. I am a Yemeni engineer from Hadramout, employed by Yemen's equivalent of the Environmental Protection Agency. I am writing today because I read in the news that you will be meeting in the White House on Thursday, August 1, to discuss the "counter-terrorism partnership" between the US and Yemen.

My family has personally experienced this partnership. A year ago this August, a drone strike in my ancestral village killed my brother-in-law, Salem bin Ali Jaber, and my twenty-one-year-old nephew, Waleed.

President Obama, you said in a recent speech that the United States is "at war with an organisation that right now would kill as many Americans as they could if we did not stop them first." This war against al-Qa'ida, you added, "is a just war - a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defense."

President Hadi, on a trip to the United States last September, you claimed that "every operation [in Yemen], before taking place, [has] permission from the president." You also asserted that "the drone technologically is more advanced than the human brain".

Why, then, last August, did you both send drones to attack my innocent brother-in-law and nephew? Our family are not your enemy. In fact, the people you killed had strongly and publicly opposed al-Qa'ida. Salem was an imam. The Friday before his death, he gave a guest sermon in the Khashamir mosque denouncing al-Qa'ida's hateful ideology. It was not the first of these sermons, but regrettably, it was his last.

In months of grieving, my family have received no acknowledgement or apology from the U.S. or Yemen. We've struggled to square our tragedy with the words in your speeches.

How was this "self-defense"? My family worried that militants would target Salem for his sermons. We never anticipated his death would come from above, at the hands of the United States. In his death you lost a potential ally – in fact, because word of the killing spread immediately through the region, I fear you have lost thousands.

How was this "in last resort"? Our town was no battlefield. We had no warning – our local police were never asked to make any arrest. My young cousin Waleed was a policeman, before the strike cut short his life.

How was this "proportionate"? The strike devastated our community. The day before the strike, Khashamir buzzed with celebrations for my eldest son's wedding. Our wedding videos show Salem and young Waleed in a crowd of dancing revellers, joining the celebration. Traditionally, this revelry would have gone on for days – but for the attack. Afterwards, it was days before I could persuade my eldest daughter to leave the house, such was her terror of fire from the skies.

The strike left a stark lesson in its wake – not just in my village, but across Hadramout and wider Yemen. The lesson, I am afraid, is that *neither* the current U.S. or Yemeni administrations bother to distinguish friend from foe. In speech after

speech after the attack, community leaders stood and said: if Salem was not safe, none of us are.

Your silence in the face of these injustices only makes matters worse. If the strike was a mistake, the family – like all wrongly bereaved families of this secret air war – deserve a formal apology.

To this day I wish no vengeance against the United States or Yemeni governments. But not everyone in Yemen feels the same. Every dead innocent swells the ranks of those you are fighting.

All Yemen has begun to take notice of drones – and they object. Only this month, Yemen's National Dialogue Conference, a quasi-Constitutional Convention which I understand the U.S. underwrites, almost unanimously voted to prohibit the unregulated use of drones in our country.

With respect, you cannot continue to behave as if innocent deaths like those in my family are irrelevant. If the Yemeni and American Presidents refuse to engage with overwhelming popular sentiment in Yemen, you will defeat your own counter-terrorism aims.

Thank you for your consideration. I would appreciate the courtesy of a reply.

Yours Sincerely,

Faisal bin Ali Jaber
Sana'a, Yemen